

Commissioner's Weekly Wrap Up

DCS Communications Office

March 4, 2005

The Week Ahead

Mon., March 7 – The Commissioner is the keynote speaker at The State of the Child: Children of the State regional social work conference in Jackson, Tenn.

Fri., March 11 – The Commissioner participates in a panel discussion at the Kentucky Psychiatric Association and Tennessee Psychiatric Association Joint Meeting in Louisville.

The Journey to National Accreditation

Submitted by Commissioner Viola P. Miller

On March 31, we will kick off the Department of Children's Services journey toward national accreditation. We are currently forming the core Council on Accreditation team, which will lead this effort. We want everyone to have an opportunity to participate if they wish. This journey will be difficult but exciting.

Becoming an agency accredited by the Council on Accreditation for Child and Family Services will be one of our proudest accomplishments. If you have any interest in being on the core team, please contact Brenda B. Bell at Brenda.B.Bell@state.tn.us.

It Takes a Community to Keep a Child Safe

Submitted by Beth Kasch, Executive Director, Child Safety

Wouldn't you agree that most regular folks in our communities think that the purpose of a CPS worker is to remove children from their homes just because a complaint has been made to DCS? How do we explain what our job really is? How do we talk about the team-oriented investigations, complex assessments, critical thinking and serious judgments we face every day? For me, the bigger question is: How do we engage communities in such a way that they are involved in the business of keeping children safe?

If I posed this question to each of you, I'd get many different answers, and all of them would be correct. There are many ways to engage communities, and the engagement has

to happen in more than one way. Please allow me to suggest some ways to include community engagement as you proceed through a typical day at work.

If done correctly, a Child and Family Team Meeting will include community representatives. There is a great chance that the family with whom you are working will select unrelated persons to be a part of the family's team: a mental health professional, a teacher, a helpful neighbor or possibly their minister. Since you'll need to meet with these folks as you prepare them for the meeting, you'll have an excellent opportunity to educate them about how we go about our business.

Please don't lose sight of what an important event the child and family team meeting (CFTM) is for a family. Talk with them about what happened at the meeting. Talk with their invited guests about what happened. Don't talk about DCS policy. Trust me, our policy is insignificant to them. Talk about how the decisions of the team will affect their child and their family. Talk about every participant's next steps towards achieving safety and permanence for the child. Listen to what the participants say about their experience. Who better to tell us if this process is working the way it should? Do more than listen. Hear ways to improve the meeting so the next family has an even better experience.

I recently had a CPS supervisor express to me her concerns about our declining public image, and she was specifically concerned about our community relationships deteriorating as a lack of trust developed. What a heavy burden for her to carry! We all need to take a piece of that burden and devote our time in our communities to addressing this issue. Every contact we make with a family or a community member is representative of our integrity as an agency. If we treat every family member, sister agency employee, fellow DCS employee and community representative with dignity and respect, and if we actively engage these folks in the business of keeping children safe, we will cause our message to be loud and clear. Saint Francis is famous for saying, "Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary use words." Our gospel is that children in Tennessee will be safe. Please don't feel the pressure of telling everyone you meet that we engage others in problem solving in order to keep our children safe. Show them by your actions. Tell them that the problem is that children are not safe. Invite them to partner in the solution.

Finally, please realize that we are in the people business. We are never going to have the exact same interaction with every family. People are not chemicals, so formulas do not work. If you do or say something that is not right for the family, own up to it with the family as quickly as possible. The relationship you have with the family will be strengthened if you quickly take responsibility for your actions (or inactions).

Let me take responsibility for my own actions. I fully realize the current state of CPS in Tennessee. It is a difficult time and we absolutely must work together to keep children safe. When children are safe, our integrity improves, and our community partnerships will be re-established. I have tried to sneak the Principles of Professional Behavior in to these mild suggestions to better your workday. I hope you'll recognize them and use them to make your interaction with families and communities more significant to the

safety of children. When you use these principles and have a good experience, please e-mail me to share.

What Exactly Is Functional Assessment Anyway?

Submitted by Christina Fly, Program Coordinator, Office of Child Safety, Functional Assessment Division

Functional Assessment is the new assessment process that DCS case managers will be using to assess the strengths and needs of the families they work with. As I learned more about this process, I realized that Functional Assessment is more than just new paperwork to do the same job we always did. It is actually a whole new way of working with families from a strengths-based, family-centered perspective, rather than the needs-based, child-centered perspective that we have traditionally had in our work.

This got me excited because when I think of my family, I think about what they mean to me. I think about the nurturing I get from my mother, the guidance I get from my father, the camaraderie I share with my brother, and the inspiration I get from my sister. My family is so much more to me than a series of events that we shared, although those events are our memories, both good and not so good. So, I got to thinking, why do we focus so heavily on the events in the lives of the families we work with, rather than what those events mean to the family? After all, it is the meaning that we give those events, how we pulled through them, and what we learned that is our real story. Functional assessment is the process for capturing the real story.

So, what is functional assessment, really?

Basically, Functional Assessment is a shared information gathering process for the family and their team. All team members contribute with informal and formal information that they share with the family and their team. The family members are given opportunities to share their story, events, and the meaning the events hold for the family.

As the team progresses in the assessment process, they create a long-term view for the family, receive information from external evaluations and records, prioritize needs, analyze and interpret information, look for underlying needs, find strengths and resources to be used in planning, and draw conclusions from available information. When the team understands the assessment information, team members can help the family make choices for planning and interventions. Sharing the functional assessment document with the child and family team is a key step in guiding the team in the planning process. The strengths, needs and resources will be used to create the permanency plan, safety plan, plan of action or individual program plan.

The functional assessment is a continuing process and document. It represents much of the work that the family and their team have done in understanding the family's strengths and needs and the child and family team's vision for the family's change process.

Engaging the family in the functional assessment process in conjunction with the CFTM process throughout the life of the case will lead to building trusting working relationship with families. When families trust DCS, they can then work with DCS as a true member of a team. This will result in children and families achieving safety, permanence and well-being in partnership with their DCS and the community.

Core Leadership

CORE Leadership Meeting Brenda Bell, Presiding March 1, 2005

Commissioner's Comments

Children's Rights, Inc. (CRI) will be coming during the first week of April. The Commissioner felt we are in a better position to acknowledge our progress and challenges with CRI related to Path to Excellence activities. Doug Diamond stated that we need to anticipate our problem areas and acknowledge them.

The TAC meeting has been scheduled for March 9.

The annual Core Leadership Team retreat has been scheduled for May.

Ken Sanders introduced Jacquelyn White, director of accounting services, to the Core Leadership Team.

Core Leadership meetings will be held bi-weekly beginning March 8. The alternate week will be used to schedule domain continuous quality improvement (CQI) meetings to update the Path to Excellence (P2E).

The Commissioner suggested we pilot a high quality visitation system as opposed to our current system.

Path to Excellence (P2E) Overview

Several Core Leadership members and program directors participated in a daylong meeting last Saturday on the Path to Excellence. Bonnie Hommrich identified themes from the meeting and asserted that members need to pay attention to the outcomes within the domains.

A prevailing theme was the need to improve intra-departmental communication, so that executive directors in all areas are aware of updates and changes in other areas. Others

also emphasized the need to more greatly capitalize on the chain of command, so that all staff members in all areas understand their responsibilities and duties. Moreover, the goal is that this clear articulation and focus will help employees take greater ownership of their positions and duties. Directors and supervisors facilitate in this process by carving out spheres of responsibility for others, trusting that their staff is capable.

Designated leaders on all Path to Excellence domain areas highlighted accomplishments in their respective domains and discussed plans and opportunities for enhancement and updating.

Regional Implementation Plans

Elizabeth Black distributed a handout on the Regional Implementation Plan due dates.



“Hold yourself responsible for a higher standard than anybody expects of you. Never excuse yourself.

– Henry Ward Beecher

When you get to the end of your rope, tie a knot and hang on.

– Franklin D. Roosevelt